

**“Memorializing Neglect: How the Hurricane Katrina Memorial Reproduces
Racial Violence”**

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Hurricane Katrina ranks as one of the costliest and most devastating disasters to strike the Gulf Coast. Floodwaters flowed with the racial geography of New Orleans—a city that sits six feet below sea level. Not only did the storm’s twenty-foot deep torrents dislodge thousands of coffins from the grounds of New Orleans’ famous cemeteries; they also unearthed the very groundwork for racist policy in New Orleans. At once, decades-old skeletal remains and long-buried fragments of racist infrastructure were brought to the surface for the public’s dissection. It is widely understood that the storm’s devastation—nearly 2,000 people killed, one million displaced, and 200 billion USD in damage (Brunkard et al. 2008)—was as much a product of governmental failure as it was a consequence of natural disaster. And the government has failed yet again with their memorialization of the event.

Not only does the Hurricane Katrina Memorial fail to facilitate the simplest task of providing a space for collective grieving and recovery for those affected by the storm; it also fails to educate visitors on the history behind Katrina’s disproportionate effects on the Black population of New Orleans, which is what this paper really focuses on. The memorial doesn’t just ignore the history of institutional racism in New Orleans; it perpetuates it. In tandem with one another, the location, construction, and design of the memorial work to reproduce the isolation, entrapment, and violence experienced by the Black community leading up to the storm, in the aftermath of the storm, and still today.

The remote location of the memorial takes the disaster of Hurricane Katrina entirely out of context, mirroring the government’s selective quotation and abstraction of information in the aftermath of the storm—forever inscribed on the plaques of the memorial and, in turn, the memories of its visitors. Situated at the far end of Canal Street, the memorial inhabits a site strategically distanced from the more frequently toured parts of New Orleans, including the

French Quarter and the Garden District. The forty-minute streetcar ride to the memorial from uptown New Orleans is incredibly discouraging to tourists who might otherwise make an effort to visit the site if it were more central to the city—especially when there are so many things to see and do in New Orleans. The isolation of the memorial effectively simulates the isolation felt by the 100 to 150 thousand people deserted on rooftops and trapped in attics in a city 80 percent inundated with water (Stow 2012). Despite its proximity to New Orleans's famous cemeteries, to which visitors regularly make pilgrimage, the memorial is rarely included on tours (Mahn et al. 2021).

The placement of the memorial behind wrought-iron gates acts as another effective barrier to visitors. There are many accounts of tourists attempting to visit the memorial during business hours but finding the grounds to be chained and padlocked, prohibiting entry—the site entirely silent, devoid of visitors and even pedestrian street traffic (Tuggle 2011). The physical enclosure of the memorial is highly reminiscent of the physical barricade of the Crescent City Connection—a three-mile bridge connecting New Orleans to the predominantly white town of Gretna located in Jefferson Parish; the bridge was one of the few remaining outlets for escaping New Orleans (Stow 2012). Similar to how the blockade kept the majority Black survivors from leaving the city, the old gates of the Charity Hospital Cemetery keep people from entering to mourn the majority Black victims of Katrina.

The site is similarly alienated from the still devastated, predominantly Black areas of the city, including the Lower Ninth Ward and much of New Orleans East, where search and rescue graffiti can still be seen scrawled on houses. Because these areas experienced such heightened levels of flooding, residents accused city officials of blowing up parts of the levee and funneling floodwaters into predominantly Black parts in order to protect white communities. While this

claim might sound extreme, it was entirely plausible, since, during the 1927 Mississippi River flood, city officials did in fact dynamite several levees to save wealthier white neighborhoods at the expense of poorer Black neighborhoods (Olivarius 2025). Because of discriminatory housing and mortgage policies, Black people tended to live in more environmentally vulnerable areas of the city than white people. Redlining in New Orleans started in the 1930s, privileging wealthy, white families with higher ground real estate and forcing poorer, predominantly Black communities to inhabit the base of the bowl-like structure (Olivarius 2025). So, physically, white people occupied higher ground than Black, not just socially and politically.

Post-storm gentrification and destruction of affordable, public housing significantly reduced the Black population of New Orleans (Olivarius 2025). Public housing units above Freret Street, largely tenanted by Black people, were especially vulnerable to flooding due to how far below sea level they sat. Those that remained after the storm are still largely contained to these parts. Thus, independent visitors of the memorial see none of the storm's lasting and disproportionate effects on the Black community, walking away from the memorial with the false comfort of knowing that at least it's all in the past. Ten years after Katrina, a poll was conducted to communicate the extent to which areas like the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East were forgotten. Roughly 70 percent of white residents reported as having felt that New Orleans had almost fully recovered, while only 44 percent of Black residents could look around their neighborhoods and say the same (Edwards 2015). The memorial directly perpetuates this sentiment, given its proximity to wealthier parts of the city and its strategic distance from areas overlooked in recovery efforts.

Even on official tours designed to teach on the history of Katrina, there is a sense of separation between the memorial, the still ravaged neighborhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward, and

the rest of the city. Tourists are paraded through New Orleans East to observe the lasting impacts of Katrina on Black communities, only to be brought directly back to the French Quarter for drinks (Mahn et al. 2021). This order of events contributes to the amnesia surrounding the ongoing effects of Katrina by framing them as separate from the rest of New Orleans, frozen-in-time, or maybe even imagined. The residents of these neighborhoods are presented as artifacts to be studied, not people to be helped. By making a spectacle out of the still ravaged homes of these communities, the Katrina tourism industry capitalizes on the experience of Black suffering. To comfort patrons of these tours, guides employ the rhetoric of ‘resilience’ to describe the condition of Black tenants (Mahn et al. 2021), mirroring the vocabulary used in the aftermath of the storm to distract from the government’s failure to aid and protect those trapped in the city.

Not only is the location of the memorial relative to other parts of the city an issue, but so is the physical plot of land chosen for its construction. The Hurricane Katrina Memorial effectively replaced the Charity Hospital Cemetery, and while the memorial acknowledges the history of the grounds, it does not communicate the disruption that occurred in the transformation of the space. The Charity Hospital was founded in 1736 and for nearly 300 years served as a critical safety net for the poor and uninsured, who were disproportionately Black. Its cemetery housed the remains of patients whose families couldn’t afford their burial. During topsoil removal and in the process of clearing the land for the memorial, human bone fragments of these individuals were unearthed and relocated, creating an uncanny symmetry to Katrina’s upheaval and displacement of 1.2 million people—what is known as the “Katrina diaspora” (Tuggle 2011). Frank Minyard, the coroner of Orleans Parish, whose responsibility it was to inter these unclaimed bodies, chose the Charity Hospital Cemetery for the memorial because it had

been donated by Louisiana State University and was already the historical resting place for the city's indigent and unclaimed dead—not because there wasn't a more prominent and meaningful location available for the memorial to be built than on top of a preexisting cemetery.

The burial of more forfeited, Black bodies in place of the remains of patients who would not have been buried otherwise, demonstrates the persistence with which the city of New Orleans has violated its most vulnerable residents. In the act of memorializing these eighty to 120 people that died during Katrina, the deaths of some 150,000 people were plastered over or entirely erased (Tuggle 2011). It's this repetition of violence against Black bodies, even post-burial, that demonstrates the memorial's perpetuation of racial antagonism. The desecration of the Charity Hospital Cemetery to make room for the Hurricane Katrina memorial eradicates centuries of indigent Black suffering and with it the legacies of those formerly buried there. The violence by which these seemingly ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability, I believe, are permutations of the same initial cruelty (Butler 2004). This prohibition dehumanizes both the lives and deaths of former constituents of the Charity Hospital cemetery by dispossessing them of their legacies and denying them the unalienable right of a peaceful, undisturbed resting place.

The memorial's enclosure of the dead within a structural recreation of the traumatic event that claimed their lives fails to promote healing or long-term recovery for victims and their families—much like reconstruction efforts failed to provide recovery for the most devastated parts of the city. The very configuration of the memorial, whose cement pathways are designed to mimic the shape of a hurricane, reproduces the disorienting terror felt by these people, trapped by the floodwaters with no way out. Along the perimeter of these paths are six mausoleums, each consisting of 18 vaults that house the unidentified and unclaimed remains of Katrina victims

(Tuggle 2011). At the center of the spiral, the hurricane's metaphorical eye, sits a carved stone marker, whose inscription recounts the events of the storm and states the memorial's purpose. This marker, however, excludes much of the vital information surrounding the deaths of those it "educates" on. For example, it notes that "storm surge and the failure of the levee system caused flooding in over eighty percent of the city, trapping thousands" (Rouse 2009) without specifying who those thousands were, how many there were—an estimated 100 to 150 thousand—or why they had no way out. A popular government narrative suggested these people chose to stay behind. This couldn't be farther from the truth. A staggering 93 percent of those left behind were poor, Black community members without the means to evacuate (Stacey 2022). Official evacuation mandates were issued only a day before Katrina made landfall, leaving minimal time for those without funds or transportation to make arrangements. And since New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin provided no assistance, they had little choice but to remain.

The inscription also fails to address why circumstances were so dire, just that they were, which isn't unusual for a natural disaster: "In the chaotic aftermath New Orleanians faced desperate circumstances in homes, hospitals, the Superdome, and other makeshift shelters" (Rouse 2009). In the case of Katrina, though, the very institutions entrusted to protect our nation's people in the event of a disaster, namely the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Army Corps of Engineers, under the guidance of the Bush administration, remained largely immobile, leaving people stranded for over a week without food, water, or electricity. This is because Michael D. Brown, Bush's FEMA appointee, lacked the disaster management experience that the role demanded (Stacey 2022). Thus, the 'desperate circumstances' alluded to in the inscription were the direct effects of allowing such bureaucratic impediments to prevail, not the inevitable consequences of any other natural disaster.

Moreover, the marker's description of first responders as "heroic" is incredibly misleading. FEMA wasn't just slow to act; They actually worked against private relief efforts, actively obstructing access to life-saving resources. FEMA repeatedly blocked delivery of emergency supplies ordered by the Methodist Hospital, refused Amtrak and the American Bus Association's offers to evacuate victims, denied the Red Cross access to the Superdome, turned away Walmart trucks loaded with water when people were dying of dehydration, and prevented the Coast Guard from delivering diesel fuel (Stacey 2022). All the while, Black people searching for supplies to survive were described by the media as "looters" and white people as "victims looking for food" (Edwards 2015). While white and Black communities both suffered from the lack of resources in the immediate aftermath, the Black community had to endure racial profiling at the hands of integral news sources. These stereotypes of criminality, chaos, and welfare dependency stuck around for many years after Katrina, negatively affecting Black people's ability to obtain resources necessary for recovery. Still, in total negligence of both the magnitude of the disaster and FEMA's weaponized incompetence, Bush publicly praised Brown for "doing a heck of a job," demonstrating the total lack of communication between the government and the people it's supposed to serve (Stacey 2022).

While parts of the inscription use plain avoidance and under-exaggeration to distract from governmental failure, other sections contain content that is blatantly falsified. The marker severely downplays the number of casualties that resulted from Katrina, indicating that there were only 1,100, when the accurate number of casualties is nearly 2,000—almost double the number displayed on the marker (Brunkard et al. 2008). The marker describes these deaths in the vaguest possible terms, dedicating the memorial to "all who suffered or died during Hurricane Katrina" (Rouse 2009) without elaborating on how or why—ambiguity that is certainly

deliberate. While 33 percent of deaths were caused by drowning, 47 percent of deaths were caused by the exacerbation of acute and chronic diseases (Brunkard et al. 2008), meaning the majority of casualties were a consequence of the government's delayed and racially inflected response, not the storm itself. But putting that in writing, on a granite marker that makes their failure permanent, is not conducive to the state's capacity in the eyes of those who survived Katrina. So, instead, they left room for interpretation, avoiding damnation by specificity.

The inscription then states: "Most of the deceased were identified and buried by loved ones in private ceremonies throughout the nation. Here lie the remaining. The unclaimed and unidentified victims of the storm from the New Orleans area. Some have been forgotten. Some remain unknown" (Rouse 2009). Julia Powers, the FEMA forensic anthropologist assigned to assist Minyard, was highly influential in spreading the idea that families *chose* not to claim their dead (Tuggle 2011). The reality, though, is that many lacked the resources to return to the city to bury their dead—if they were even made aware that they had dead to bury. So, no, these people were not forgotten. They were separated and barricaded from their family, making them impossible to reach. The notion that it was a willful action by Black families not to claim their dead, now forever institutionalized by the Hurricane Katrina Memorial, perpetuates one of the most corrosive myths in the national memory of the disaster as well as the flawed understanding of African Americans as uncivilized.

The inscription ends by celebrating the lives of those that died and by glorifying the resilience of New Orleans: "Let their souls join into an eternal chorus, singing with the full might of the indomitable spirit of New Orleans" (Rouse 2009). This glorification of the fighting spirit of New Orleans mimics the rhetoric used by tour guides and media officials to soften the blow of Katrina's destruction. By reminding visitors of New Orleans's historical strength, the memorial

makes the devastation of Katrina more palatable, arguing that centuries of racial injustice primed the city's Black community for what was to come. This description of survivors as 'indomitable' necessitates an explanation for what made their spirit that way—a measurement of how much Black New Orleanians have been forced to endure to become indomitable.

Memorialization is never neutral. The choices made about the Hurricane Katrina Memorial's construction—where to place it, whose ground to displace, what to inscribe in stone—reflect the same patterns of neglect, erasure, and willful distortion that defined the government's response to the storm itself. To allow this memorial to stand as the definitive account of Katrina does not grant justice to the 1,836 people who died and the millions more whose lives were upended by governmental failure. What is needed is not a plaque amendment or a bus route to Canal Street, but a fundamental reimagining of how New Orleans memorializes this disaster—one that centers the voices of those most devastated and situates the storm within the long history of redlining, discriminatory housing, and governmental indifference. Only then can we start debugging and repairing our nation's collective memory of Katrina.

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